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HEMI-SYNC® AND INSIGHT ORIENTED PSYCHOTHERAPY A THEORETICAL MODEL

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During the last several years, a number of articles have appeared in The Monroe Institute publications stating the benefits of Hemi-Sync in facilitating psychotherapy. But how does hemispheric synchronization contribute to the psychotherapeutic process? In this brief paper I will attempt to offer a theoretical explanation supported by some preliminary research findings.

Insight-oriented psychotherapy is based on the premise that psychological, emotional, and behavioral problems and difficulties originate from unresolved unconscious conflicts left behind from our childhood years. These unconscious conflicts continue to affect us—our relationships, our careers, and ultimately our perception of reality—unless they are acknowledged and dealt with. Therefore, the goal of psychotherapy is to make these unconscious conflicts conscious so that we may gain control over them. Theoretically speaking, once this is accomplished we are no longer victims of these unconscious forces, and our reality is no longer tainted and distorted by these determinants of behavior which normally operate outside our conscious awareness. Unfortunately, however, accomplishing this task fully is extremely difficult and in most cases almost impossible. The patient and the psychotherapist often have to grapple and struggle with a variety of conscious and unconscious defensive barriers and practical limitations, which make the psychotherapeutic process long and emotionally (as well as financially) exhausting. Yet, psychotherapy cannot be effective without understanding and dealing with such unconscious defenses and what erected them in the first place.

A simple example may be used to illustrate how unconscious conflicts and defenses are formed and how they may affect a person's life. Imagine a scared child who is given a highly conflicting message by her mother as she enters her parents' room looking for security and comfort. Upon entering the room the child hears the verbal message (left hemisphere), "I really want you to stay here with us," while at the same time she loudly "hears" the facial expression

(right hemisphere), "I wish you would go to your room so that we could sleep in peace without you." In other words, the left hemisphere hears an inviting, pleasing message while at the same time the right hemisphere "hears" rejection and experiences sadness and emotional pain. These overwhelmingly conflicting messages may seriously impair the child's ability to respond to her mother. Her only way out is if and when one of the messages is blocked, or pushed outside the realm of conscious awareness. As Freud (1915) so insightfully stated, "Defense is always against affect." That is, if the material perceived by the right hemisphere (which is affective in nature) is defended against, the child is likely to go on and behave "normally" for the time being.

Although the child may appear to have resolved the emotional and perceptual conflict of the moment, it is very likely that seeds of doubt, mistrust, and confusion have already been planted in her mind. As she continues to deny, block, and repress her inconsistent perceptions, she experiences greater tension and turmoil within. In other words, the nonverbal material in the right hemisphere, even though submerged in the unconscious, will continue to have a life of its own, and will, at one point, manifest itself in the form of physical and/or psychological symptoms.

To put it differently, lack of validation and communication between the two hemispheres may result in the construction of defenses which consequently, and in time, could alienate the child from herself. These unconscious barriers are apt to isolate and stop her from recognizing and acknowledging her resources, abilities, potentials, and propensities that could easily save her from emotional and psychological torment and make problem solving a manageable task. Hence, we come to witness the birth of "mental and psychiatric disorders" and psychosomatic symptoms and conditions.

Early in his work, Freud (1913) discovered that by allowing his patients to free-associate, they were able to uncover some of the unconscious material that was interfering with their normal functioning. Symptoms, both physical and psychological, slowly began to disappear as the unconscious became more conscious. Even today, free association continues to be a potent tool for conducting insight oriented psychotherapy. It appears that, during the free-association process, important information and material tend to seep through the defensive barriers spontaneously. This results in recognition and realization of determinants of behavior, conflicts, and traumas often locked in the dungeons of the unconscious. But again, because of the complexities of defense mechanisms, this process is often time-consuming and extremely exhausting. Theoretically, the process of psychotherapy can be accelerated should the two hemispheres begin to communicate more freely with each other and transcend the defensive barriers. How can we facilitate this communication?

Hemi-Sync and Hemispheric Communication

It has been approximately one year since I began to study the effects of Hemi-Sync on cortical activity. Study after study I was able to demonstrate objectively that Hemi-Sync does indeed do what it is meant to do: synchronize the two hemispheres. What are the implications of this inter-hemispheric synchronization? Once I recovered from the euphoria of observing synchronized brain states after exposure to the Hemi-Sync signals, I began to explore what was happening cognitively, as well as effectively, to each subject.

The results of my pilot study have been elating and quite exciting. In two studies, while psychotherapy patients were exposed to the Hemi-Sync signals, they were asked to free-associate—that is, to talk about whatever came to their minds. In both cases, from an objective standpoint (cortical activity) two observations were made. Initially, there was a tendency toward inter-hemispheric synchronization followed by brief moments of total bilateral synchrony. It was during these moments of whole-brain synchrony that subjects often had an aha, or clarity, experience. Based on these observations, I have come to believe that one of the many states that Hemi-Sync facilitates is that of hemispheric communication or, perhaps, as a psychotherapist would put it, “an integration of content and affect”. This, to a large extent, is what psychotherapy is all about, and it is remarkable to observe that Hemi-Sync may indeed facilitate and expedite such a process.

A number of groundbreaking papers stating that meditation played an important role in psychotherapy (Smith 1976) appeared in psychotherapy journals in the late seventies. The authors of such papers, however, failed to propose a convincing explanation for why or how meditation contributed to the process of psychotherapy. At last, it appears that we may have an answer. In our neuropsychological laboratory we have already demonstrated that experienced meditators tend to synchronize their brains. More recently, we are beginning to see that moments of bilateral synchrony coincide with moments of clarity. Hence, perhaps the reason meditation is such an important tool in facilitating psychotherapy is because it promotes whole-brain synchrony; it opens a channel of communication between the two hemispheres which may allow certain unconscious defenses to be transcended. If we can systematically and consistently demonstrate this process in more elaborate and well controlled studies, that is, hemispheric synchrony followed by clarification of affect and thoughts, I believe we will be making a giant leap toward better understanding of how the human mind operates and how to facilitate its healing.

Summary

Psychoanalytic explanations of how inter-psychic conflicts come about and how psychotherapy attempts to resolve such conflicts were presented. Based on the findings of two pilot studies, it was proposed that Hemi-Sync may indeed facilitate inter-hemispheric communication which, in turn, promotes psychotherapy and assists in the resolution of unconscious conflicts. Further

systematic and well controlled studies are needed to support the findings and the theoretical model presented in this paper.

References

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